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The races of the Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus* and their nomenclature

by D. J. Pearson

Received 13 July 1998

The Isabelline (or Red-tailed) Shrike *Lanius isabellinus** is usually regarded as comprising four races. Two of these breed in central Asia and migrate southwestwards to winter in Arabia and NE Africa. The other two breed in N China and make shorter migrations to winter from Pakistan and NW India to Iran.

*Often treated in the past as conspecific with the Red-backed Shrike *L. collurio* (e.g. Vaurie 1959) or with both Red-backed Shrike and Brown Shrike *L. cristatus* (e.g. Dement'ev & Gladkov 1954, Voous 1960), but regarded here as a separate species, following recent authors such as Panov (1983, 1996), Cramp & Perrins (1993) and Glutz von Blotsheim & Bauer (1993).

In west central Asia, *phoenicuroides* breeds from Iran and Afghanistan to S Kazakhstan. The male is brown above with a rufous crown, a black face mask and pink-tinged white underparts; the flight feathers are blackish when fresh, and show a conspicuous white patch at the primary bases; the rump and tail are bright rufous. Paler birds with greyer head and upperparts occur within the range of *phoenicuroides*, typically in lowland areas. These have been treated as a distinct race, *karelini*, by some Russian authors (e.g. Stepanyan 1990), but are regarded as variants of *phoenicuroides* by Roselaar (1993). Female *phoenicuroides* differs markedly from the male, having a dark brown face mask, dark brown flight feathers, usually with a creamy primary patch, and finely barred sides and flanks. A rufous-tinged crown typically contrasts with a drab brown mantle.

In east central Asia, a paler race ranges through Mongolia to Transbaikalia and south to the N China borders. This form was named *speculigerus* by Vaurie (1959), who apparently followed Kozlova (1930) and Stegmann (1930), and this has been followed in turn by recent authors, including Panov (1983, 1996), Cramp & Perrins (1993), Glutz von Blotsheim & Bauer (1993) and Lefranc & Worfolk (1997). The male has a black face mask, blackish brown flight feathers and a white or whitish primary speculum like *phoenicuroides*, but is uniformly isabelline-grey above, including the crown, and pale creamy buff below with a vinous tinge. Females are like those of *phoenicuroides*, but more uniform sandy grey-brown, with buff rather than whitish underparts and no warm tinge on the crown.

Another isabelline form breeds in the Tarim basin of NW China. This was regarded as nominate *isabellinus* by Stegmann (*op. cit.*) and Vaurie (*op. cit.*), and more recently by e.g. Stepanyan, Cramp & Perrins, Glutz von Blotsheim & Bauer and Panov. Males resemble *speculigerus* in body colouration, but are slightly paler, with the rump and tail paler rufous. They differ in having much paler, grey-brown flight feathers, usually with little or no white visible at the primary bases, and in showing little contrast between buff edged tertials and wing-coverts and the pale sandy grey-brown mantle. The mask is brownish and incomplete on the lores. Further east, the Tsaidam depression in N China is occupied by the similar but slightly larger *tsaidamensis*. Sexual dimorphism is much less marked in these Chinese forms than in those of central Asia.

L. i. phoenicuroides and *speculigerus* breed later and have longer migrations than the Chinese races. In keeping with this they differ slightly in structure; they have a larger wing/tail ratio (see Cramp & Perrins 1993) and the second primary is usually longer than the sixth (it is equal to or shorter than the sixth in *isabellinus*). They also have a different moult strategy (Stresemann & Stresemann 1972). Practically all birds wintering in Africa and most of those in Arabia have a complete moult after arrival, finishing between January and March, and this affects first-year birds as well as adults. In *isabellinus sensu* Vaurie, on the other hand, adults usually renew their entire plumage before autumn migration, and young birds retain their juvenile primaries until about a year old. This moult difference is not, however, completely clear-cut. Some *speculigerus*, and even *phoenicuroides*, moult some primaries in the breeding area or during autumn migration halts (Neufeldt 1978), and a few have

completed moult in Arabia in autumn. Some *isabellinus*, on the other hand, appear to reach India before moult is completed.

Structurally and physiologically, *phoenicuroides* and *speculigerus* seem closely allied, and Neufeldt (1978) treated them together as a species distinct from the Chinese birds. Panov (1996) however stresses the strong similarity between *speculigerus* and *isabellinus* as regards plumage and bill colour. These two races have been reported to interbreed (Stegmann 1930), and have been treated together in the past, as a single race (e.g. Stresemann 1927) or as races within a species separate from *phoenicuroides* (Dolgushin *et al.* 1970, Kryukov & Panov 1980).

Earlier writers on Africa (e.g. Jackson 1938, Chapin 1952, Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1952, Archer & Godman 1961) used the name *isabellinus* for the pale race of Isabelline Shrike wintering there. I have pointed out, however (Pearson 1979), that of the races described by Vaurie only *phoenicuroides* and *speculigerus* reach Africa, and in the Natural History Museum, Tring, collection I was unable to find any examples of *isabellinus sensu* Vaurie from west of Iraq. This contradiction appears to result from the different racial names used by Stresemann (1927) and Stresemann & Stresemann (1972) on the one hand and Stegmann and Vaurie on the other. African writers were presumably following Stresemann (1927), who used nominate *isabellinus* for pale birds wintering in both Africa and India, and did not then recognise a separate Mongolian race.

When discussing moult in the Isabelline Shrike, Stresemann & Stresemann (1972) again initially placed the isabelline forms wintering in Africa and India together. But they recognised that two different moult groups were involved and went on to reserve *isabellinus* for migrants to Africa which moulted in winter, and used *arenarius* Blyth 1846 (together with *tsaidamensis*) for migrants to India which moulted in summer. They assumed that their *isabellinus* was distinct from Vaurie's *speculigerus*, but they were not able to say exactly where the former bred, nor where the latter wintered. In fact, the Stresemanns' *isabellinus* and Vaurie's *speculigerus* would seem to be one and the same; there appears to be only one race of isabelline birds with a black mask and dark flight feathers breeding in east central Asia.

To establish the correct names for the races of *L. isabellinus* it is necessary to refer back to the type specimen. Mauersberger (1980) evidently assumed that Stegmann, in his 1930 review, had been unable to do this. The type is a male collected at Kumfuda in *western* Arabia by Hemprich and Ehrenberg (1833). Their description reads as follows: *'Magnitudine LANII rufi.* Isabellinus, supra leviter cinerascens, subtus albicans, cauda cinnamomea parum gradata unicolore, taenia nigra per oculos ducta supro albo limbata, gula et crissa albis, remigibus nigricantibus fascia media alba, rostro pallido dorso et apice nigricante'.

This clearly indicates the Mongolian rather than the Tarim basin race. Gerhard Nikolaus has kindly located and examined this specimen for me at Berlin Museum. He confirms that it is an example of *speculigerus sensu* Vaurie, freshly moulted, and like the isabelline birds wintering in the Sudan Nile Valley. Dr Sylke Frahnert has since kindly sent me photographs. These show a black face mask complete across the lores, blackish brown wings with white on the primary bases extending about 4

Plate 2. (a) lateral and (b) dorsal view of the type specimen of *Lanius isabellinus isabellinus*. Photographs courtesy of Sylke Frahnert, Berlin Museum.

mm beyond the primary coverts, and the second primary tip falling between those of primaries 5 and 6 (see Plate 2).

Thus, the nominate race of the Isabelline Shrike is the Mongolian form, and the name *speculigerus* Taczanowski 1874 becomes a synonym. A new name is needed for the Tarim basin birds, and Stresemann's *arenarius* is available. We have then two distinctive central Asian forms that migrate to Africa and Arabia, *phoenicuroides* and *isabellinus*, and two similar N Chinese races that migrate to India, *arenarius* and *tsaidamensis*.

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Gerhard Nikolaus for examining the type of *Lanius isabellinus* for me at Berlin Museum, and to Dr Sylke Frahnert for making photographs available. I also thank Peter Colston, Dr Robert Prŷs-Jones and Frank Steinheimer for facilities and assistance at the Natural History Museum, Tring. Norbert Lefranc made valuable comments on an earlier draft of this note.

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A new montane subspecies of *Sheppardia gunningi* (East-coast Akalat) from Tanzania

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Received 9 September 1998

The Nguu (Nguru North) Mountains in Tanzania constitute a very steep montane area, which is part of the famous Eastern Arc Mountains but rather isolated at the edge of the dry Maasai steppe. The first ornithological survey of these mountains was conducted by the 'Project Mount Nilo '95 Expedition' from the University of Cambridge, U.K. (Seddon *et al.* 1995). Among the interesting discoveries was a population of akalat, identified as *Sheppardia gunningi*, East-coast Akalat. Many birds were mist-netted and photographed, and a good description was provided in the trip report, but no specimens were collected.

Some concerns about the identity of these birds might exist because of the similarity of akalat species (at least in certain field guide illustrations) and because other Tanzanian montane forests are occupied by *S. sharpei*, Sharpe's Akalat (while *S. gunningi* inhabits coastal forests below 300 m in Tanzania). In order to settle the identity of this population, Jacob Kiure visited the Nguu Mts again 13–29 November 1996, and collected a series of specimens which are now kept in the Zoological Museum, Copenhagen (ZMUC). The Nguu population clearly represents *S. gunningi*, but differs from adjacent coastal populations, morphologically and genetically. We will describe it here as a separate subspecies, which we name.

Sheppardia gunningi alticola ssp. nov.

Holotype. ZMUC kat.nr. 92.216, adult male, 27 November 1996, Lulago Forest in Nguu Mts (5°34′S, 37°28′W).

Paratypes. ZMUC kat.nr. 92-217-29, collected in the Nguu Mountains by J. Kiure, in Gombero Forest 13–25 November and Lulago Forests 27–29 November. Also tissue samples of all specimens are deposited in the ZMUC.

Etymology. The subspecific name emphasises its isolated occurrence in a high-altitude habitat island.